

Library Journal names Union County Carnegie Library the Best Small Library in America 2009

Contributed by Curtis Rogers
Tuesday, 03 February 2009

Union County Carnegie Library (UCCL), in Union, South Carolina, has been named the Best Small Library in America 2009 by Library Journal.

Full article at www.libraryjournal.com/bestsmalllibrary Union County Carnegie Library (UCCL), in Union, South Carolina, has been named the Best Small Library in America 2009 by Library Journal. This annual award, cosponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, showcases the exemplary work of public libraries serving populations under 25,000 whose high standards, innovative services, and commitment to their community make them extraordinary. UCCL serves the 8,973 residents of the city of Union and a number of its smaller communities in the surrounding rural county. The beautiful and historic library was chosen this year for the incredible transformation that it underwent over the past three years which, according to a local resident, turned a once "selective club warehousing an out-of-date collection" into an "inclusive, modern, service-oriented, community center." Overall, visits to the library have increased exponentially and patrons now represent the diverse demographic of the community. This transformation is the result of new leadership, vision, accessibility, and exemplary customer service.

In October 2005, Nancy Rosenwald revolutionized the UCCL when she stepped in as the library's new director. Immediately recognizing the need for change, she first focused on excellence in customer service and making that service easily available to patrons regardless of race, gender, age, ability or status. The front-line staff became a major player in this mission and members of the community's teens were added to the front-line staff on both a paid and volunteer basis because they are "vibrant, enthusiastic, willing learners and teachers" said Rosenwald. Smaller changes such as the elimination of late fees and fines were implemented to help bolster the service transformation.

The library also underwent a total technology transformation to ensure that Union County citizens could participate in a world that is increasingly reliant on computers and the Internet. With modest budget realities, UCCL was forced to make savvy decisions to move this initiative forward. The library worked with a local university to buy 18 of its computers at a deeply discounted rate when a lease expired. It also ensured that the staff was up-to-date on new technologies offered at the library so that patrons can get the help they need learning how to use the computers and the Internet. Additionally, the library's bookmobile was equipped with wireless Internet so that the driver can access online resources for remote users.

Today, the library's computer workstations, including special family-oriented stations and those open to everybody from teens to seniors, are in full demand from open to close. Located in the heart of a rural county, the library also provides the only high-speed Internet access available to many residents.

One of the biggest changes in the library was revamping service for children and teens. Previously, children and teens were welcomed reluctantly in the small space. The children's section underwent a makeover and the colors of the walls and shelves were repainted from gray to bright yellow; an art cart was brought in to foster creativity; and healthy snacks were made available during after school hours. In 2005 the summer reading program had 300 participants. This number rose to 4000 by summer 2008. Now each child in the district leaves school for the summer with a summer reading packet supplied by UCCL.

"The staff and the board of the Union Carnegie Library deserve the greatest recognition for this wonderful honor," said Nancy Rosenwald. "Without a mandate for change from the board, we could not have moved forward so readily; without the staff's desire to provide excellent service to their community, the vision would not have been realized. We are ecstatic to have won this award for our community!"

This year, for the first time in the award's 5-year history, two finalists will also be receiving prizes. Of the over 60 institutions nominated, LJ proudly named Pinewoods Library and Learning Center in Athens, Georgia and Idaho's Weippe Public Library as the finalists for the 2009 Best Small Library in America.

Union County Carnegie Library will receive a \$15,000 cash award to support its services and outreach to the community. The winner and two finalist libraries will each receive conference costs for two library representatives to attend the 2010 Public Library Association conference in Portland, OR, and recognition at a special awards ceremony on behalf of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

"We are pleased to support the Union County Carnegie Library," said Jill Nishi who leads the Gates Foundation's work on behalf of U.S. libraries, "and we applaud the library's staff and supporters for their dedicated work to ensure it can connect people to information and education through technology. Their resourcefulness,

use of community partnerships, and focus on transformative programs and services sets an important example for libraries across the country that are striving to bolster opportunities for patrons in the face of a challenging funding climate.”

See more information about the winner and finalists in the cover story in the February 1 issue of Library Journal and online at www.libraryjournal.com/bestsmalllibrary.

About Library Journal

In its 132nd year of publication, Library Journal is the oldest and most respected publication covering the library field. LJ is read by over 100,000 library directors, administrators, and staff in public, academic, and special libraries.

About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people’s health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, the foundation is led by CEO Jeff Raikes and co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffet. More information is available at www.gatesfoundation.org.